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ABSTRACT

Parents' Fair Share (PFS) was a national demonstration program to help low-income noncustodial parents find more stable and better-paying jobs, pay child support consistently, and become more involved parents. PFS provided the following services: employment and training services; peer support groups; voluntary mediation between parents; and modified child support enforcement. PFS's effectiveness was evaluated in 1994-1996 by randomly assigning each of more than 5,500 fathers to PFS or a control group. PFS increased employment and earnings for the least-employable men but not for those who were more able to find work on their own. PFS encouraged some fathers to assume a more active parenting role. Men referred to PFS paid more child support than men in the control group. The following were among the recommendations regarding future programs: (1) structure the program to encourage longer-term participation and to include job retention

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services; (2) increase fathers' access to their children by involving custodial mothers in the programs and providing the fathers with legal services to gain visitation rights; and (3) mandate fathers' participation in employment-related activities to increase payments among low-income caseloads. (A discussion of PFS' effects on children is appended. Thirty-three references and 11 publications from the PFS demonstration are listed.) (MN)

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The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support Their Children

Final Lessons from Parents' Fair Share

Cynthia Miller
Virginia Knox

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The Challenge of Helping Low-Income Fathers Support Their Children

Final Lessons from Parents' Fair Share

Cynthia Miller
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November 2001

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This report is based on research conducted for the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration, a national demonstration project that combined job training and placement, peer support groups, and other services with the goal of increasing the earnings and child support payments of unemployed noncustodial parents (usually fathers) of children on welfare, improving their parenting and communication skills, and providing an opportunity for them to participate more fully and effectively in the lives of their children.

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Overview

Fathers provide important financial and emotional support to their children. Yet low-income noncustodial fathers, with low wages and high rates of joblessness, often do not fulfill their parenting roles. The child support system has not traditionally helped these men to do so, since its focus has been on securing financial support from fathers who can afford to pay. Meanwhile, fathers who cannot pay child support accumulate debts that can lead them to evade the system and its penalties altogether — and further limit their contact with their children.

Parents' Fair Share (PFS) was designed as an alternative to standard enforcement. Launched in 1994 in seven sites, PFS was a national demonstration program that aimed to help low-income noncustodial fathers find more stable and better-paying jobs, pay child support on a consistent basis, and become more involved parents. Funded by the organizations listed at the front of this monograph, PFS provided employment and training services, peer support groups, voluntary mediation between parents, and modified child support enforcement.

Besides designing the PFS demonstration, MDRC evaluated it. Between 1994 and 1996, each of more than 5,500 fathers was randomly assigned to PFS or a control group, and the program's effects were estimated by comparing how the two groups fared over a two-year period. This monograph synthesizes the demonstration's key findings and uses them to formulate several recommendations for the next generation of fatherhood programs.

Key Findings

◇ As a group, the fathers were very disadvantaged, although some were able to find low-wage work fairly easily. PFS increased employment and earnings for the least-employable men but not for the men who were more able to find work on their own. Most participated in job club services, but fewer than expected took part in skill-building activities.

◇ PFS encouraged some fathers, particularly those who were least involved initially, to take a more active parenting role. Many of the fathers visited their children regularly, although few had legal visitation agreements. There were modest increases in parental conflict over child-rearing decisions, and some mothers restricted the fathers' access to their children.

◇ Men referred to the PFS program paid more child support than men in the control group. The process of assessing eligibility uncovered a fair amount of employment, which disqualified some fathers from participation but which led, nonetheless, to increased child support payments.

Recommendations for Future Programs

◇ How to increase employment and earnings: Structure the program to encourage longer-term participation and to include job-retention services. Provide the fathers who cannot find private sector employment with community service jobs or stipends, or combine part-time work with training. Use providers who have experience working with very disadvantaged clients. Earmark adequate funding for employment services.

◇ How to increase parental involvement: Increase fathers' access to their children by involving custodial mothers in the programs and providing the fathers with legal services to gain visitation rights. Be aware of the potential for increased parental conflict.

◇ How to increase child support payments: Mandate fathers' participation in employment-related activities to increase payments among low-income caseloads. Encourage active partnership of fatherhood programs with the child support system.

Preface

The Parents' Fair Share (PFS) Demonstration was both pathbreaking and ambitious when it began in 1994. Targeted at low-income noncustodial fathers of children receiving welfare, the program was designed to help the fathers find stable and better-paying jobs, pay child support on a consistent basis, and assume a fuller and more responsible role in their children's lives. At the time, very little was known about this group of men and what might work to help them, and few initiatives had sought to address simultaneously their problems relating to low earnings, child support, and family involvement. PFS was also unusual in being one of the few programs of its type to be rigorously evaluated using an experimental design. A series of earlier documents has reported on the effects of the program. This monograph aims to synthesize the key findings from the PFS Demonstration and to distill lessons from the PFS experience.

As the monograph shows, we learned a lot from PFS. We learned about the men themselves: Low-income noncustodial fathers are a disadvantaged group. Many live on the edge of poverty and face severe barriers to finding jobs, while those who can find work typically hold low-wage or temporary jobs. Despite their low, irregular income, many of these fathers are quite involved in their children's lives and, when they can, provide financial and other kinds of support. We also learned about providing services to these fathers: Some services, such as peer support, proved to be very important and valuable to the men and became the focal point of the program. Other services, such as skill-building, were hard to implement because the providers had little experience working with such a disadvantaged group; it was difficult to find employers willing to hire the men, and the providers were not equipped to deal with the circumstances of men who often were simply trying to make it from one day to the next. Finally, we learned about the challenges of implementing a program like PFS, which involves the partnership of various agencies with different goals, and about the difficulty of recruiting low-income fathers into such a program.

This monograph uses what we've learned from PFS to suggest several lessons for the next generation of programs for fathers. The fatherhood field is growing by leaps and bounds, reflecting the increasing commitment of community leaders and policymakers to help low-income men reach their full potential as fathers. The lessons from the PFS Demonstration take us one step further in the search to find what works.

Judith M. Gueron
President

Acknowledgments

This is the final document in a series on the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) Demonstration and, thus, reflects the input and support of many partners over a number of years. The first thanks go to the participating states and localities and to the staff and participants in each site who worked daily to reach the program's goals and to support the research efforts. The demonstration was also supported by a group of forward-looking funders, who shared the vision that including low-income noncustodial fathers is integral to the nation's antipoverty policy. We thank Drew Altman, formerly at The Pew Charitable Trusts, Ann Kubisch and Ronald Mincy, formerly at the Ford Foundation, Freddye Webb-Petett at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Howard Rolston at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Roxie Nicholson and Ray Uhalde at the U.S. Department of Labor, Michael Laracy at The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lorin Harris at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, as well as the other individuals and organizations named in the full list of funders shown at the front of this monograph.

Within MDRC, the project represents the collaboration of many colleagues. Gordon Berlin was the driving force behind PFS from its inception, with guidance and input from George Cave, Fred Doolittle, Judith Gueron, Milton Little, Suzanne Lynn, Marilyn Price, and Sharon Rowser.

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Greg Hoerz directed the administration of the PFS survey, which was was designed with help from an outside advisory group that included Irwin Garfinkel, Linda Mellgren, Daniel Meyer, and Judith Seltzer. Abt Associates tracked and fielded the survey. Joel Gordon oversaw the complex random assignment and enrollment process, with assistance from Frank Yang. Gaston Murray developed the PFS management information system, the programming for which was done by Maryno Demesier and Juanita Vega-Chetcuti. Margarita Agudelo coordinated the collection and processing of the administrative records and child support enforcement data, with oversight from Debra Romm. Programming and processing of these data were done by Natasha Piatnitskaia and Martin Gaynor, respectively, with assistance from Ngan Lee. Charles Daniel, Joyce Dees, Donna George, Marguerite Payne, and Carmen Troche handled random assignment calls and entered data, with supervision from Shirley James.

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The Authors

INTRODUCTION

Half of all children in America today will live apart from their fathers at some point in childhood. Many will never live with them. Such is the changing face of the American family, a result of rising rates of divorce and childbearing outside marriage over the past several decades, which have led society to rethink the notion of what it means to be a family and to make room for types that may not fit the traditional definition. But what does it mean to be a father in this new landscape? For a long time, fathers have played little role in the national dialogue on single-parent families, except as the focus of child support enforcement.

Policy discussions today have a new focus on "fatherhood" in the fuller sense of the word. Policymakers, researchers, and advocates have begun to look more closely at fathers and how they contribute to their children's well-being. The emerging consensus is that fathers matter more than was earlier recognized: Children are better off when their fathers are involved both emotionally and financially in their lives.[1] This consensus has generated great interest in helping men — particularly, low-income noncustodial fathers — become better parents.

Unfortunately, many low-income fathers face tremendous obstacles in fulfilling their role, because they have little to offer their children financially. Economic trends over the past three decades — including the shift in employment from manufacturing toward higher-skilled jobs and the movement of jobs from the inner cities — have significantly worsened the labor market prospects of less-educated men. They were one of the few groups whose inflation-adjusted earnings fell between the early 1970s and the 1990s.[2] And although they have benefited somewhat from the recent economic expansion, they have been one of the last groups to do so.

Adding to the problems of low-income men is that society's definition of "father" is still strongly tied to the ability to provide financial support. As a result, many fathers with little to contribute monetarily are reluctant to be involved with their children in other ways. To be fair, there will always be fathers, rich and poor, who choose not to support their children, and child support enforcement is designed to make sure that they do. Ironically, however, for low-income men, child support enforcement may create another obstacle to fulfilling their roles as parents.

The child support system has been dramatically strengthened over the past two decades. Several rounds of federal legislation have given states a variety of new tools to enforce support payments — such as wage withholding, paternity testing, and the recent Directory of New Hires, under which all employers must report new employees to the child support enforcement system. These policies have increased collections for many mothers, but largely from fathers who have stable jobs and can afford to pay. The policies have not worked well for poor fathers and mothers. Poor fathers often face child support orders that are set at levels they cannot

1. Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Knox, 1996; Carlson, 1999.

2. Gottschalk, 1997; Bound and Freeman, 1992.

pay; their orders are rarely modified during periods of unemployment; and so they accumulate unrealistic levels of debt for past periods of nonpayment. When they do pay child support, most of the money is kept by the state to offset the mothers' welfare costs. This approach is not effective for men who cannot afford to pay, and it may even be counterproductive: When fathers can pay, they have little incentive to do so, since none of the money goes to the family; and their inability to pay consistently, along with the large arrearages they owe, may motivate them to evade the child support system by losing contact with their families and moving out of the formal job market into the underground economy. Historically, the child support system has had the capacity to punish fathers for nonpayment, but it has offered no strategy to help them become payers of child support.

The day-to-day activities of child support administrators and family court judges reflect this reality. When a noncustodial father is brought in and claims that he is unable to pay support, staff can either threaten jail to coerce payment or send him away with an order to seek work. The first option works for men who can afford to pay, but neither option works for those truly unable to pay. The agencies and courts have no way to sort the unwilling from the unable — or to work constructively with the latter.

Parents' Fair Share (PFS) was designed to be a third option: In exchange for cooperating with the child support system, the program offered fathers services to help them find more stable and better-paying jobs, to pay child support consistently, and to become more involved parents. PFS operated as a demonstration in seven sites around the country and was designed to test the effects of providing employment and training and other services to low-income noncustodial parents.[3] The underlying assumptions of the program were that when fathers are supported in playing an active role in their children's lives, when they have gainful employment, and when the system responds appropriately to their changing circumstances, they are more likely to pay child support. The program not only gave the child support system a constructive way to deal with low-income fathers but also helped the system to distinguish between men who were unwilling as opposed to unable to pay. Fathers who were hiding their employment found it difficult to do so for long, because those who were enrolled in PFS were required to participate in its services. In this way, the program was able to focus services on the men who most needed them.

This monograph summarizes the lessons learned from the PFS Demonstration. The program was evaluated in a series of earlier reports that assessed its effects on the fathers' employment, earnings, child support payments, and involvement with their children.[4] The findings from the evaluation provide useful information about poor fathers, their needs, and what services might work to help them. For example, the circumstances of the fathers in the study varied. Although as a group they were very disadvantaged, with low incomes and education levels, some found work fairly easily, while others suffered long periods of unemployment. Some fathers visited their children quite frequently, while others visited very little. These data help to dispel myths that all low-

3. The word "father" is used throughout the text because more than 95 percent of the noncustodial parents in the demonstration were men.

4. The complete list of publications from the PFS Demonstration appears on page 38.

income noncustodial fathers are unemployable and uninvolved. But they also point to the difficulty of serving such a diverse group. Although PFS did encourage more fathers to make child support payments, it was only modestly successful on the other two fronts: It increased earnings only among fathers with the worst labor market prospects, and it increased visitation with children only among fathers who were the least involved initially. The findings also highlight the challenges of implementing and sustaining a program of this type. PFS called for various local agencies, including the child support agency and employment and training providers, to work together in providing services to the men. Some services were more difficult to put in place than others, and sustaining the partnership of such diverse agencies proved challenging.

Although there is growing interest across the country in designing programs to help low-income fathers contribute to their children's well-being, there is also still much to learn about how to accomplish this goal. The current momentum in the fatherhood field creates an exciting opportunity to test new approaches. When PFS started in the early 1990s, it was the first large-scale attempt to address the interrelated issues of fathers' involvement, unemployment, and child support payments. Today, hundreds of fatherhood programs can be found. Some are small, community-based programs initiated and supported by state or local governments, while others are large-scale, nationwide initiatives, such as the Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration run by the Office of Child Support Enforcement and the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration operating in several states (described below). The growth in programs for low-income fathers reflects in part the availability of new funding sources that until recently were not available to serve this population. For example, one provision of the 1996 welfare reform law allows states to use some funds from their welfare block grant (referred to as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) for fatherhood programs.

Despite the abundance of programs, this is still a new area in terms of finding out what works and what doesn't. Few program models have been rigorously tested. Moreover, although stereotypes about poor noncustodial fathers abound, there is still a lot to learn. For example, what types of relationships do they have with their children and with the mothers of their children? Do they want to be involved as parents, and, if so, why aren't they? What factors hinder their ability to find and keep jobs? What types of services are likely to help them advance to better jobs and develop solid relationships with their children? And how should services be structured — for example, should the child support system be involved, and should custodial mothers be involved? The PFS Demonstration, evaluated using a random assignment research design, provides unusually rigorous information about such questions and allows the next generation of fatherhood programs to build on its lessons.

PARENTS' FAIR SHARE

The PFS Demonstration was a path-breaking and ambitious initiative when it started in the early 1990s. It was the first program that targeted employment and training services to low-income noncustodial parents (the vast majority of whom are fathers) and the first program to be evaluated in a large-scale study. At the time, very little was known about this group of men and what might work to help them. The program's goals were to increase these fathers' earnings, to increase their child support payments, to help them become more involved parents, and ultimately, through these effects, to improve the lives of their children.

The program also posed a host of operational challenges, such as linking child support enforcement with employment and training providers. The pilot phase, from 1992 to 1993, was designed to test the feasibility of operating this type of program. Results from the pilot led to a full-scale evaluation, started in 1994 in seven sites, that was designed to rigorously test whether the program met its goals. The demonstration was managed and evaluated by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) and was funded by a group of private foundations, federal agencies, and the participating states.

PFS grew out of the Family Support Act of 1988, legislation aimed at improving the economic status of children and parents receiving welfare. Central to the bill was the idea of "mutual obligation" — that parents must be the primary supporters of their children but also that the government should provide services and supports to help parents become self-sufficient. For mothers, the government's obligation meant increased spending for employment and training programs for welfare recipients; for fathers, it meant increased standardization of, and spending for, child support enforcement. However, in recognition that tougher enforcement would probably not work for fathers with poor labor market prospects, the act also included a provision to allow a group of states to offer employment and training services to low-income noncustodial parents. This provision sought to test whether the employment and training services that had been found to be effective for mothers receiving welfare might also help fathers. PFS was authorized by the act as a means of formally evaluating these programs.

The Program Model

To be eligible for PFS, fathers had to be under- or unemployed and have child support orders in place but not be making regular payments. In addition, the children for whom they owed support had to be current or past recipients of welfare. In most cases, the men were referred to the program during court hearings or appointments scheduled by child support agencies. Some hearings were part of normal child support practice, and some were held specifically to determine whether nonpaying fathers were eligible for PFS. For the men who were referred to the program, participation in the PFS core activities was mandatory, and fathers were expected to participate until they found a job and started paying child support. Those who failed to participate were referred back to the child support agency for

follow-up, which sometimes led to an additional court hearing.

The PFS program comprised four key components:

◇ **Peer support.** Structured around a "Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum"[5] and run by trained facilitators, peer support sessions covered a range of topics, including parental roles and responsibilities, relationships, managing anger, and coping with problems on the job. The purpose of peer support was to inform participants about their rights and obligations as noncustodial fathers, to teach positive parenting skills, and to teach skills designed to help them stay employed.

◇ **Employment and training.** This component was designed to help the fathers secure long-term, stable jobs at wage rates that would allow them to support themselves and their children. Program sites were encouraged to offer a variety of services, including job search assistance, job club sessions, skills training, basic education, and on-the-job training.

◇ **Enhanced child support enforcement.** Although the child support system already had the means to enforce payments, local child support agencies in each site were asked to go beyond their traditional way of doing business. The biggest change was to focus more attention on cases that had typically received low priority — low-income, unemployed men. Sites were also expected to institute several new procedures, such as lowering the fathers' child support orders while they participated in PFS, coordinating with PFS service providers, and quickly modifying support orders when the fathers found employment or failed to comply with PFS requirements.

◇ **Mediation.** A father's payment of child support and involvement with his children are influenced by his relationship with the custodial mother, which often includes disagreements about visits, household spending, child rearing, and the roles of other adults in the household. Sites were required to provide services, modeled on those used in divorce cases, to help parents mediate such differences. Participation in this component was voluntary.

After attending an orientation session and meeting with their case managers, the fathers typically started their participation in the program with peer support, which was designed to take place two or three times per week for about six to eight weeks. Upon completing a minimum number of sessions, they moved on to either a job search or an education and training component. Some sites offered peer support and job-related services concurrently, and most sites did so by the end of the demonstration, as it became apparent that the men could not afford to be out of the labor market for long.

The Key Agencies

Because PFS provided such a diverse set of services, the program rested on local partnerships among child support agencies, employment and training providers, and community-based service organizations.[6] The child support agency provided enhanced enforcement and was responsible for identifying and bringing in eligible fathers, and the other partners provided the PFS services. One of the partners assumed the role of local "lead" agency. When the lead was a service provider, it often housed the initial services and came to be identified as the physical "home" for PFS. When the child support agency was the lead, it contracted out initial PFS services to a nonprofit organization.

5. The latest version of the curriculum (Hayes, 2000) is available from MDRC at www.mdrc.org.

6. In some sites, state human service agencies were also partners.

The collaboration among diverse agencies posed several challenges, since the three main partners — the child support agencies, the employment and training providers, and the community-based social service organizations — had not typically worked together in the past and often had to develop new procedures and practices specific to PFS. The child support agencies, for example, had to change from a focus on maximizing collections of support payments to one that allowed the fathers' obligations to be reduced while they participated in the program. The employment and training services were provided by outside organizations, such as community colleges and providers funded through the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA). Although JTPA agencies had a long history of providing employment and training services, most of their participants had volunteered or been welfare recipients; the agencies had limited experience working with very disadvantaged men. Moreover, PFS asked them to offer these men a fairly broad array of services, such as on-the-job training slots. Finally, the community-based organizations, whose missions centered on *advocating* for low-income families, were now asked to develop a working relationship with child support staff and to report the fathers' employment or noncompliance to that agency.

The Evaluation

The PFS Demonstration operated in seven sites: Los Angeles, California; Jacksonville, Florida; Springfield, Massachusetts; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Trenton, New Jersey; Dayton, Ohio; and Memphis, Tennessee. From 1994 to 1996, over 5,500 noncustodial parents who were found eligible for PFS were randomly assigned either to a PFS group that was referred to the program or to a control group that was not. The effects of the program are estimated by comparing the two groups' outcomes over time. The random assignment research design provided a powerful and reliable method for estimating the program's effects: Because each father was assigned at random to one or the other group, the two groups did not differ in terms of employment, child support, or parental involvement when the program started.

The program's effects on fathers' employment, earnings, and child support payments were assessed using data provided by the states' unemployment insurance (UI) systems and by child support agencies. These data are available for each father for the two years after he entered the program, that is, from the point at which he was randomly assigned to the PFS or the control group. Surveys were also administered to a randomly selected subset of the fathers and to a group of custodial mothers who were associated with the men in the evaluation. The surveys were conducted one year after each father entered the program and include data on the fathers' employment and earnings, as reported by the men themselves, and data on the fathers' visitation and informal support, as reported by the custodial mothers.[7] Data are available for 553 fathers from the noncustodial parent survey and 2,005 custodial mothers from the custodial parent survey. For fathers who owed support for more than one child, data on child support payments and visitation refer to the youngest child owed support. Finally, data are also available from an ethno-

7. Data on visitation and informal support were also collected by the survey of fathers, and results are presented in an earlier report (Knox and Redcross, 2000).

graphic study that tracked and interviewed over 30 men in the PFS group during their time in the program.[8]

The Findings in Brief

The PFS evaluation measured the program's effects on a range of outcomes and provides important information about the fathers and the challenges of implementing a comprehensive program that required the cooperation of diverse agencies. The characteristics of the fathers, the majority of whom were black or Hispanic, highlighted several challenges in serving them. On the one hand, most had limited education, and many had arrest records; many lived on the edge of poverty, with little access to public assistance or employment and training programs; and many had no stable place to live. Thus, this group was a very disadvantaged segment of the noncustodial father population, although probably not the most disadvantaged, since one of the eligibility criteria for PFS was having a child support order in place. Custodial mothers who have obtained child support awards tend to have higher education levels and incomes than those who have not, suggesting that the fathers with orders might also be less disadvantaged than those without orders.[9]

On the other hand, there was a fair amount of diversity among the fathers in the outcomes the program was intended to affect. For example, some of the men were able to find jobs, albeit low-wage jobs, on their own, while others were more disconnected from the mainstream labor market. Also, many of the men were already quite involved in their children's lives, contrary to popular perception, while others had very little contact. Although most of the men expressed a strong commitment to their children, many were hindered in their efforts to be an effective parent, often because their own fathers had not been involved parents.

Employment and Earnings

◇ PFS increased employment rates and earnings for the most-disadvantaged men.

Some of the men were able to find jobs on their own, and the program did not typically succeed in helping them get better jobs. However, PFS increased employment and earnings for the men with more severe employment barriers — specifically, for those with no high school diploma and those with little recent work experience.

◇ Most of the men participated in job search services, but fewer than expected participated in skill-building activities.

The sites were encouraged to offer a variety of employment and training services in order to meet the diversity of the fathers' circumstances. However, skill-building activities, particularly on-the-job training slots, proved difficult for the sites to develop, in part because providers had little experience working with very disadvantaged clients. The men in PFS were a "difficult-to-employ" group because of their backgrounds — making employers reluctant to hire them — and because of the poverty and instability they faced in their daily lives, which often limited their ability to benefit from the program's services. In many cases, employment and training providers were not able to develop effective practices to address these issues.

8. Johnson, Levine, and Doolittle, 1999.

9. Hanson, Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Miller, 1996.

Fathers' Involvement

◇ PFS did not generally affect fathers' level of involvement with their children, but it did increase involvement among those who were least involved initially.

As a result of PFS, some fathers took a more active role in parenting — primarily, those who had been the least likely to visit their children when the program began. On average, however, the program did not increase fathers' levels of visitation.

Child Support

◇ Bringing in low-income noncustodial fathers to assess their eligibility for PFS increased child support payments. For the fathers who were found eligible, PFS also increased child support payment rates.

Bringing in fathers to determine their eligibility for the program required child support staff to deal with child support cases that they normally would not handle: fathers without known employment or income. This process uncovered a fair amount of unreported employment and led to an increase in child support payments. In addition, for fathers who were found eligible for and in need of PFS services, the sites were able to change their usual way of doing business by lowering child support orders while the men were in the program and modifying the orders when the men left the program or found a job. The PFS package of services led more men to pay support than would have otherwise; that is, the PFS fathers paid more often than the fathers in the control group.

Recruitment and Collaboration

◇ Initially, some sites fell short of their enrollment goals, which affected the provision of services that were delivered in group settings. Implementing PFS itself was also a challenge, requiring continuous attention by management to sustain the partnerships of agencies and the new methods of delivering services.

The number of fathers enrolled in PFS depended on three factors: the number of fathers in the caseload who were identified as potentially eligible for PFS; the number of these men who came in for hearings; and, among those who appeared, the number who were, in fact, eligible. All sites struggled to meet their initial enrollment goals, and falling short of the goals sometimes negatively affected the delivery of such services as peer support and job club, both of which depend on group processes. These enrollment problems added to the significant challenges managers already faced, given that PFS required close cooperation among agencies that had not typically worked together and that often had competing missions. In the early phases of the program, tensions among the agencies about their new roles often weakened the coordination of services. Overcoming these difficulties required managers' continuous monitoring and commitment. Most sites were eventually able to reach their recruitment and participation goals, and several invented new approaches to meeting these goals that have had lasting effects on program operations.

The Next Generation of Programs for Fathers

The "fatherhood field" has grown dramatically over the past several years. Across the country, literally hundreds of programs are being run, funded by local foundations, community-based organizations, or governments. The programs vary in their scale, the types of men they serve, and the services they provide, but they generally all focus on employment, parenting, and/or child support. Several of the most prominent programs are those being run as part of larger-scale demonstrations. The Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration — started in 2000 under waivers provided by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and administered by the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership — includes programs across 10 states. The demonstration is designed to provide employment, health, and social services in an effort to help young, low-income noncustodial fathers build better relationships with their children and develop better parenting partnerships with the mothers of their children.[10] Each of the programs involves collaboration between the local child support agency and community-based organizations. Related to this demonstration is the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, which is tracking a sample of unwed fathers and mothers in 20 cities around the country for several years after the birth of their child. The study will provide useful information about the nature of relationships in low-income families and what factors, including child support and other policies, help such families stay together.[11]

OCSE has also funded the Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration projects in eight states. Started in 1997, the program's goals are to increase noncustodial fathers' employment and earnings and help them become more involved parents. This program, too, depends on partnerships of child support agencies and local providers to offer employment and training services, case management, services to increase fathers' access to their children and visitation, and enhanced child support enforcement.

More such programs are likely to be developed in the future, given the existence of new funding sources available to serve low-income noncustodial fathers. As part of the welfare reform law of 1996, for example, Congress allows states to use some of their TANF funds to provide employment services to this population; over half the states have used this option to start programs for fathers. The welfare law also allows states to order noncustodial fathers who are not paying child support to participate in employment and training programs. The recent Welfare-to-Work grant program, funded by the Department of Labor, also provides funding to programs for fathers. Although the program's general purpose is to help hard-to-employ welfare recipients find and keep jobs, low-income noncustodial fathers are included as an eligible target group. A number of states have used Welfare-to-Work funds to develop programs for fathers.

Many of the existing fatherhood programs have goals that are similar to those of PFS and involve the same agency partner-

10. The term "fragile families" is used to denote the precarious nature of the unions among many low-income unwed parents; see Mincy, 1998.

11. McLanahan and Garfinkel, 2000.

ships and similar services. Programs that are currently operating can learn from the experience of PFS, and those that are being evaluated will add to our knowledge of what works for fathers. The following sections present the PFS findings in more detail, drawing from the earlier implementation and impact reports as well as from longitudinal ethnographic research, which provides a detailed portrait of the lives of over 30 fathers who were enrolled in PFS.[12] The sections are organized around the themes outlined above: employment and earnings, fathers' involvement, child support, and recruitment and collaboration. The final section offers concluding thoughts about the challenges that lie ahead for the child support system and for fatherhood programs.

12. See the earlier reports, listed on page 38, for the complete results. Although the results shown here are drawn largely from the earlier reports, in a few cases they cover a longer-term follow-up period using more recent data. Updated results are available on request.

EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

The goal of PFS's employment and training activities was to help the fathers get stable jobs at wage levels that would allow them to support themselves and their children. This was challenging for several reasons. First, although several types of services have increased employment among single mothers (usually welfare recipients), successes for low-income men have been few and far between. Second, some of the men can find work on their own, although it is often in temporary and low-wage jobs. For PFS to have an effect on low-income fathers, it had to go beyond helping them find jobs to helping them find better-paying jobs, which has traditionally been hard to do for any group. To address these challenges, sites were encouraged to offer a wide array of services, including those that would help the men earn income quickly (job search) and those that would provide opportunities to earn income and enhance workplace skills (on-the-job training).

The PFS experience has revealed a lot about the characteristics of low-income noncustodial fathers, what they need, and the challenges of serving them.

Fathers' Characteristics

◇ Some of the men were able to find work on their own, but many faced substantial obstacles to finding and keeping jobs.

On the whole, the fathers in PFS were a disadvantaged group (see Table 1, page 11). Most had been arrested at some point prior to entering the program; only about half had a high school diploma; and many had very

weak connections to the mainstream labor market.[15] They were also very poor, perhaps more so than was previously appreciated. Most lived on the edge of poverty, and many relied on friends and family for housing and day-to-day survival. These circumstances affected how the men reacted to and benefited from the program's services, as illustrated by the following statement from one father in the program:

> ***Do I buy clothes to go on an interview? Do I take a bus to go to do the interview? Or do I hold onto the money to buy something to eat and have enough left over to chip in for my housing?***

In some ways, these men resemble the low-income custodial mothers of their children, being disproportionately black and Hispanic and with low levels of education. Unlike custodial mothers, however, most of the fathers had prior arrest records, and few had access to government assistance. Their arrest records were an important strike against them from an employer's point of

15. The fact that the large majority of the fathers were black or Hispanic partly reflects the higher unemployment rates among these groups than among white men.

TABLE 1

FATHERS' CHARACTERISTICS: BACKGROUND, EMPLOYMENT, AND EARNINGS

The fathers were a disadvantaged group, with a range of labor market experiences. About half worked for most of the year, while others experienced long spells of unemployment.

Race/ethnicity	
Black	60%
Hispanic	23%
White	14%
Average age	31
Had high school diploma	53%
Had been arrested prior to program entry	67%
Housing	
Lived with parents or other relatives	33%
Moved 3 or more times during year	23%
Homeless in 3 months prior to survey	9%
Worked less than 6 months of year 1 of follow-up	56%
The proportion of this group who had not worked within the 6 months prior to program entry	44%
Average annual earnings in year 1 among those who worked	$3,050
Worked 6 or more months of year 1 of follow-up	44%
The proportion of this group who had not worked within 6 months of program entry	32%
Average annual earnings in year 1 among those who worked	$11,289

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the noncustodial parent survey.

NOTE: Employment outcomes are measured for the control group only. All other outcomes are measured for the full sample.

view;[14] indeed, one of the fathers in PFS was fired just two days into a new job, after his employer discovered his prior arrest.

Despite the large number of men facing significant labor market barriers, there was diversity in their employment experiences. In the extreme, they can be considered to fall into two groups. In the first group (about 45 percent of the sample) are fathers who found jobs and stayed employed for most of the follow-up period. The types of jobs that they got were usually low-paying and their average annual earnings were about $11,300. Temporary agencies were one source of employment, especially for the younger men. The second group (56 percent of the sample) consists of men with much weaker connections to the labor market, who typically experienced long spells of unemployment before and after program entry. These fathers worked fewer than six months of the follow-up year, on average, and almost half of these men had not worked for at least six months prior to entering the program.

Findings About Employment and Earnings

◦ The employment and training component that most of the PFS fathers participated in was job search services. Skill-building activities were difficult for sites to implement.

PFS designers felt that, to increase the fathers' earnings, the program would have to do more than provide job search services. Sites were strongly encouraged throughout the demonstration to provide short-term skills training and on-the-job training, but few were able to do so for large numbers of men. Nearly 60 percent of the fathers participated in job club or job search, but only about 20 percent were able to participate in skill-building activities. Some sites were more successful at this than others, but even the successful sites placed only about a quarter of the fathers in skill-building activities. On-the-job training slots, in particular, were seen as the component with the most promise. In these positions, the employer hires and trains the participant while the program pays a portion of his wage. In most cases, the employer providing the training eventually hires the worker as a permanent employee.

On-the-job training slots were difficult to implement for several reasons. PFS developed agreements with the local JTPA agencies to provide training slots to a certain number of fathers, and the slots were funded by PFS, by JTPA, or by some combination of the two. But JTPA providers faced performance standards that encouraged them to work with more motivated, easier-to-place clients. As a result, when the slots were funded by JTPA, providers were limited in the number of men they wanted to serve and the amount they wanted to spend on them.[15] In contrast, providers were much more flexible in admitting the fathers when the slots were funded by PFS. JTPA providers were also finding it more difficult to develop on-the-job training slots than in the past. Government audits of the program during the 1980s had led to additional reporting requirements for employers, to prove that employees were receiving training. This additional paperwork burden made fewer employers willing to participate.

14. Holzer, 1996.

15. Some of the men also had difficulty meeting JTPA eligibility requirements. With no stable residence, they sometimes provided their mother's or some other relative's address; this person's income could then be counted as family income, which put the father above the income-eligibility cutoff.

Another reason for the limited use of skill-building was that these providers were not accustomed to working with very disadvantaged clients, and some perceived PFS participants as workers whose poor performance might damage their long-term relationships with employers. As a result, many staff were reluctant to work with the PFS fathers, and they sometimes used strategies that were not effective. For example, it was common practice for providers to develop on-the-job training slots with employers and then to look for people who could fill the slots; consequently, few of the PFS fathers were deemed likely to succeed in these positions. A more fruitful strategy, employed by a few sites, was to identify the type of job that was suitable for an individual and then to find an appropriate employer. Two of the sites that achieved relatively high participation in skill-building activities contracted for some of these services with providers who had previously worked with very disadvantaged populations. The staff in these organizations did not see the PFS men as having insurmountable barriers to employment.[16]

◇ PFS increased employment and earnings for the most-disadvantaged men.

The diversity of the fathers' employment histories meant that PFS had to achieve two goals. First, for the more-disadvantaged men with limited work experience, the program had to help them find and keep jobs. The findings suggest that PFS succeeded to some extent for these men:

> ***There wasn't really too much bad about job club, I mean, 'cause it — it helped you. I mean, there was certain things that I knew, you know, as far as about obtaining employment and everything. . . . But, I mean, for brothers who didn't know, it was a great help for 'em, you know what I'm saying? Teachin' 'em how, you know, [to] handle themselves in an interview, how to write they résumés, references, how to present themselves . . . you know, to go out and get a job, so that they could start paying their, you know, thing — what type of fathers they wanted to be and things like that.***

Earnings data are available from both the UI records data for two years of follow-up and the survey for one year. Earnings from the survey are shown in Figure 1, page 14. On average, the program increased fathers' earnings for the full survey sample, but Figure 1 shows that this increase was concentrated largely among men with relatively greater employment barriers — in particular, those with no high school diploma and those with no recent work experience. For both of these more-disadvantaged groups, the fathers in PFS (the group randomly assigned to PFS) had higher earnings during the year than the fathers in the control group. But their average earnings were still quite low.[17]

Second, the program had to help the more-employable fathers find better, higher-paying jobs. The pattern of impacts, however, shows that PFS did not succeed on this front. Although it had been difficult to increase low-income workers' earnings in the past, skill-building activities were seen as the most promising strategy for this group. Men who are more employable will not generally benefit from basic job search services,

16. See Doolittle et al. (1998) for more information on implementation of skill-building activities.

17. The program also led to larger increases in earnings among white and Hispanic fathers than among black fathers.

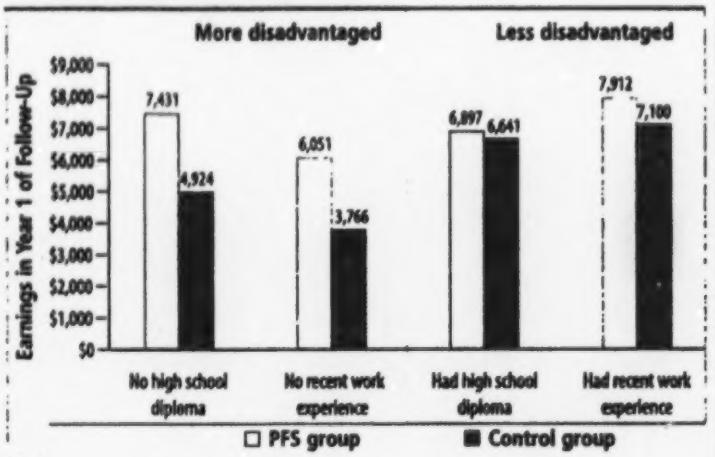
FIGURE 1

IMPACTS ON FATHERS' EARNINGS

PFS increased earnings, but only for more-disadvantaged fathers.

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from the noncustodial parent survey and PFS Background Information Form.

NOTE: Among the more-disadvantaged fathers, the differences in earnings between the PFS group and the control group are statistically significant at the 5 percent level. The impacts of PFS on the earnings of the less-disadvantaged fathers are not statistically significant at the 10 percent level. Statistical significance levels were calculated using a two-tailed t-test.



because they can find similar jobs on their own:

> ***I mean, I think I can — as far as the job thing goes, [the program] taught me a lot about unemployment, but I think I can do better on my own. I went out there, and I found me a job. I didn't sit up there and wait on Parents' Fair Share to help me. I mean, it's okay to do that, but it's just not for me.***

Many of the fathers were able to find jobs on their own in part because of the state of the economy during the period the program was evaluated. Unemployment rates were fairly low in most of the demonstration cities, although rates were higher for black and Hispanic men than for white men. Had unemployment rates been higher, the program may have had wider-ranging effects.

Fathers' self-reported employment from the survey is confirmed by data for the same group of fathers from employer-reported UI records, although based on the UI analysis only one impact — that for the men with little prior work experience — is statistically significant. Survey data typically find more employment than is reported to the UI system. Although the UI data include most types of employment, they do not capture earnings from cash jobs or earnings from the informal economy. Since many low-income men work in these types of jobs, PFS from the outset viewed survey data as a critical complement to the UI data.

There are also differences in the size and "robustness" of effects between the survey sample of 550 men and the full sample of over 5,000 men. The impacts for the full sample, using the UI records, are smaller than those for the survey sample and are not statistically significant. These differences reflect both that the survey sample consists of men who entered the program later in the intake period and that the program became more effective over time as the coordination and delivery of services improved.[18]

18. See Martinez and Miller (2000) for more discussion of the survey- and UI-based effects.

Lessons About Employment and Earnings

◦ Use service providers who have experience working with very disadvantaged clients. Earmark adequate funding for employment services, since such clients may not benefit from existing, mainstream programs.

It seems fair to say that the on-the-job training that was needed to help the more-employable fathers in PFS find better jobs was not given a sufficient test in the demonstration because so few slots were provided. What is known is that the slots were difficult to develop, both because funding was inadequate and because PFS contracted with service providers who were not able, and sometimes were unwilling, to work effectively with these fathers. Programs that serve low-income men should consider using providers outside the mainstream training system, such as those working with ex-offenders. These providers may have more flexibility with employers in developing job opportunities, and they are also likely to be more familiar with the federal bonding program, which insures against theft and other potential problems that might concern employers when hiring ex-offenders.

For men who are less employable, service providers outside the mainstream may also be better able to identify and address their reasons for not working. In PFS, the complexities of the fathers' lives interfered with their ability to benefit from the program; caseworkers were often frustrated, for example, that the men did not follow up on job leads. Although job search services and the development of "soft skills," such as appropriate workplace behaviors, may be helpful for some such men, others will need more-remedial services — to address substance abuse or housing instability, for example — before they can benefit from job search.

Programs for less-employable fathers will also require funding that is adequate to provide the intensive services that many of the men need. Ideally, a specific funding stream would be earmarked for hard-to-employ men, which would help to ensure that the fathers facing the greatest barriers to work do not have to compete for services with less-disadvantaged participants from other programs and that they get the special supports they need. The evidence shows that men who are less employable will not benefit from more-mainstream services.

◦ Provide stipends while the fathers are in training, or allow them to combine part-time work with training.

A common refrain among the fathers in PFS was that they could not afford to work at a minimum-wage job, and yet they also could not afford to wait for a better job. Because they were not eligible for many public assistance programs, they had few resources to fall back on while participating in the program. As a result, many quickly went back to the low-wage, short-term jobs that they had held before the program. Although skill-building is thought to be the best route to a better job, staff were torn between the desire to help the fathers gain skills and the realization that the men could not be out of the labor market for long. Designers of future programs should consider giving fathers the opportunity to earn money while gaining skills, by providing monthly stipends or opportunities to combine part-time work with training. Even with part-time work, a stipend may still be necessary, and some current programs are pursuing this dual track. For example, sites using funds from the Department of Labor's Welfare-

to-Work grant program are required to place fathers in jobs before providing education and training. The availability of a stipend might also help with efforts to recruit men into the program and to increase their participation rates.

◊ Provide community service jobs for fathers who cannot find private sector jobs.

Ideally, service providers and job developers would be able to match disadvantaged men who are willing and able to work with local employers who are willing to hire them. The fact is, however, that many employers are *not* willing to hire potential candidates like the fathers in PFS, particularly men with arrest records or little work experience.[19] Many such men also live in inner cities, where unemployment rates tend to be higher than in surrounding suburbs. In addition, some men have employment barriers, such as unstable housing or substance abuse, that may limit their ability to hold a private sector job. In such cases, community service jobs in the nonprofit or public sector might provide the recent work experience and references that are needed to later find employment in the private sector. These jobs might also be a way to move less-employable men into jobs while at the same time providing them with extensive support services — much like the Supported Work model that was tested in the 1970s, which provided participants with a year of carefully structured, subsidized employment.

If community service jobs are to be a gateway to private sector employment, program designers need to make sure that the jobs provide opportunities to learn skills and that they resemble real jobs and are viewed as such by local employers. The Supported Work program had only minimal long-term effects on some disadvantaged groups in part because the program had difficulty building links between the subsidized jobs and jobs with private employers.

◊ Make the program longer-term, and include job retention services.

Some of the men in PFS found jobs while in the program, then left the program, and then lost their jobs. Although the program was not explicitly time-limited, few fathers returned to PFS after leaving, either because they felt they could do as well on their own or because sites generally did not communicate to them that they could return. After the pilot phase of the demonstration, sites were encouraged to make the program longer-term and to provide post-placement services, but few did — perhaps because it was not a part of the original model or perhaps because they had little experience providing post-placement services.

Program designers should consider structuring employment programs for disadvantaged men in ways that encourage long-term participation. For example, counselors could provide long-term follow-up to help men keep their jobs or, if they lose their jobs, to help them find new ones. Allowing and encouraging the men to return to the program when necessary might also help with the delivery of services. Many PFS services were organized around groups and were often difficult to sustain over time as group participation fell. One way to keep the fathers connected to the program might be to provide ongoing help with job-related expenses while the men are working; some sites that use Welfare-to-Work grant funds have adopted this strategy.[20]

19. Holzer, 1996.

20. Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2000.

FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT

Noncustodial fathers can support their children in a variety of ways, and one goal of PFS was to help the men become both more involved and more effective as responsible parents. This was also a personal goal for many of the fathers themselves. Two of the program's components — peer support and mediation — were designed to directly affect family relationships and fathers' involvement. Helping men become more involved parents requires an understanding of whether and how involved they are already and of what factors hinder or help their parenting efforts. The PFS evaluation provides lessons about the kinds of services that may be more (or less) effective and for which types of families.

Fathers' Characteristics

◊ **Most fathers in PFS expressed a desire to be involved in their children's lives, and many were quite involved already. But many saw their own economic security as a precursor to playing a greater role in their children's lives.**

Three themes emerged from the PFS research to characterize the fathers' relationships with their children. First, the relationships varied widely. Nearly a third of the fathers visited their children at least weekly during the follow-up year, and almost half visited at least once a month (see Table 2, page 18).[21] This extent of visitation highlights that the payment of formal child support is not always a good measure of fathers' involvement, and it defies popular stereotypes that low-income men "walk away from their children."

Second, most of the PFS fathers wanted to be more involved in their children's lives and were deeply interested in learning how to become better parents. The majority reported that they would like to visit their children at least weekly.

Third, the fathers faced several obstacles to becoming more involved. For example, many of their perceptions of themselves as fathers were strongly tied to their ability to provide support, either in the form of cash or in-kind goods. As a result, some of the men voluntarily fell out of contact with their children during times when they had no money to offer:

> ***It's hard when you're trying to be a father, right, and then you turn around saying you're the best father in the world to your kids, which you're trying to be, and then all of a sudden you can't even buy a pack of Pampers, you know?***

Many of the men also lacked basic parenting skills — including knowledge of age-appropriate activities and school involvement — probably because few of them had been raised by involved fathers themselves. Another important obstacle was that few of the fathers had a legal visitation agreement. Most low-income men do not have these agreements, because their support orders are

21. This level of visitation is slightly higher than levels reported for nonresident fathers nationally, in part because all the fathers in the sample had child support orders in place and in part because the visitation questions on the survey referred to the youngest child for whom the father owed support, so that the sample more heavily comprises recently separated families. Research using national samples finds that fathers' visitation falls over time after the parents separate (Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer, McLanahan, and Hanson, 1998). This pattern was also found for the PFS fathers: Those with young children visited more often than those with adolescent children.

TABLE 2

FATHERS' CHARACTERISTICS: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Many fathers visited their children regularly, but few had legal visitation agreements.

Marital status of father and custodial mother	
Married	18%
Cohabited	32%
Neither	51%
Father had child support order	100%
Father had legal visitation agreement	30%
Number of times father visited children in 6 months prior to survey	
None	30%
Less than once per month	24%
At least once per month	46%
At least once per week	30%
Visitation preferences	
Father and custodial mother would both like weekly visits between the father and child	59%
Father, but not custodial mother, prefers visits to occur at least weekly	31%

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from the noncustodial and custodial parent surveys.

set by state agencies, which by law are not allowed to address custody and visitation issues, rather than by divorce lawyers.[22]

Findings About Fathers' Involvement

◇ **Most of the fathers participated in peer support, which was well received by the men and proved to be the central PFS activity. Few parents took up the program's offer of mediation services.**

Peer support was structured around *The Responsible Fatherhood Curriculum* supplied by MDRC.[23] Led by a trained facilitator, this component of the program was designed to inform participants about their rights and obligations as noncustodial fathers, to encourage positive parenting behavior, and to enhance their life skills. Peer support turned out to be the central PFS activity (70 percent of the fathers participated) and provided a focal point for the participants. It engaged the fathers and gave them a place to talk through, and get advice about, issues surrounding employment, family, and being a father. It also succeeded in encouraging the men to try to play a more active role in their children's lives. For example, one site developed specific activities to facilitate involvement — participants were given assignments, such as "make dinner for your child," and were asked to report back to the group; the site also held special group events for the fathers and their children. For many men, peer support was important because they were listened to and heard:

22. Garfinkel, 2001.

23. See Hayes, 2000. This curriculum was adapted from an earlier document, *Fatherhood Development: A Curriculum for Young Fathers*, developed by Public/Private Ventures.

Within, like, peer support, a lot of brothers got, you know, together, that was going through the same type of, you know, problems with the system, you know. Peer support was saying — it was teaching us how to overcome it. . . . So that was the support right there, you know. It was givin' us that extra booster, that extra lift that we needed to overcome, you know, the trials and tribulations that we were going through at the time. . . . And how to, you know, how to get over it and get through it.

It helped me to be a better father, to get better perspective on what I'm supposed to do as a father, and I appreciated that.

The mediation component was intended to help resolve family conflicts and thus remove another significant barrier to the fathers' involvement. All sites were required to offer mediation services modeled on those provided through many family courts in divorce cases. Although staff in several sites occasionally served as informal mediators when asked to do so, the formal mediation component was rarely used. This reflected both a lack of interest on the part of one parent or the other and the fact that the sites did not place a high priority on encouraging participation in this voluntary component; it also took special attention from staff to get both parents to agree to and attend mediation.

◦ PFS did not generally affect fathers' level of involvement with their children, although it did increase visitation among those who were initially the least involved.

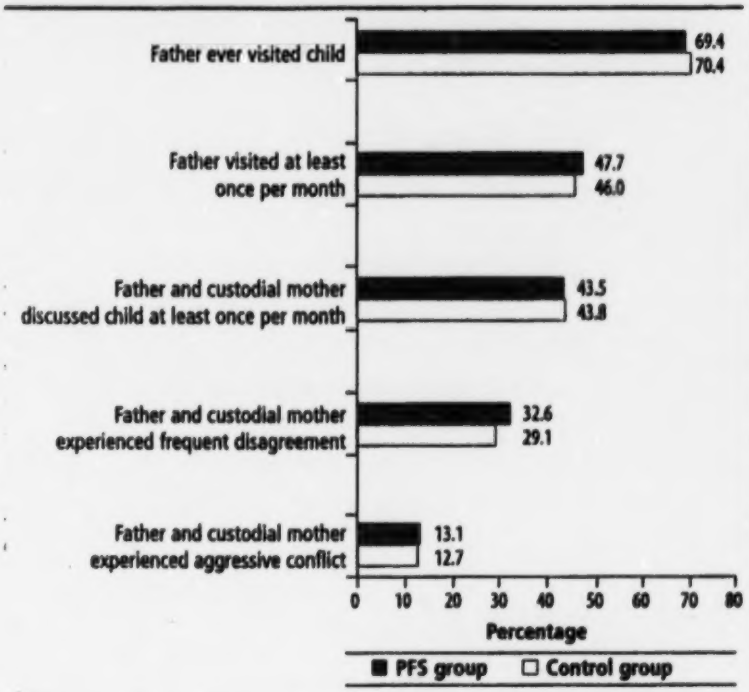
On average, fathers in the PFS group did not visit their children more often than fathers in the control group (see Figure 2, page 20). Visitation did increase, however, in those sites with the lowest initial visitation rates, suggesting that the program's services could be effective when targeted to fathers with the most room for improvement. In addition to increasing fathers' involvement, another goal was to help the men become better parents by improving the quality of their interactions with their children. Observations by field researchers of the level of engagement in the peer support sessions suggested that participating fathers were learning new skills that would change the way they parent. But the evaluation cannot answer whether the program met this goal, since the questions included on the surveys do not measure this type of outcome. Assessing the quality of interactions between parents and children most likely requires in-depth observational studies.

PFS also seems to have increased fathers' efforts to engage in active parenting, as evidenced by a small rise in the frequency of disagreements between the sets of parents, disagreements that typically centered on child-rearing issues rather than visitation. The increase in active parenting could have resulted from participation in peer support or from the fact that fathers in PFS were more likely to pay child support — either of which could have emboldened the men to assume a more active role in their children's lives. This change was most pronounced among fathers of very young children and those without a high school diploma. For fathers of young children, for example, the program led to an increase in parents' discussions about their child. This outcome was accompanied, however, by increased frequency of disagreements and increased aggressive conflict between the parents. Such results for fathers of young children suggest that a promising strategy for increasing their involvement might be to target services to

FIGURE 2

IMPACTS ON FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT

PFS did not affect visitation but appears to have increased some fathers' efforts to be active parents.



SOURCES: MDRC calculations from the custodial parent survey and PFS Background Information Form.

NOTES: The outcomes cover the six months prior to the survey, or months 7 to 12 of follow-up, and are based on custodial mothers' reports.

The difference between the PFS group and the control group in the percentage of custodial mothers who reported frequent disagreement with fathers is statistically significant at the 10 percent level. The other differences are not statistically significant at the 10 percent level. Statistical significance levels were calculated using a two-tailed t-test.

recently separated families, while also monitoring the potential for increased conflict. The Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration does this to some extent by targeting young noncustodial fathers.

◇ **The program had few systematic effects on the children.**

Although the key outcomes analyzed in the PFS evaluation relate to the fathers, it was hoped that the ultimate beneficiaries of the program would be their children, whose lives would be improved by increased child support and greater involvement with their fathers. The survey of custodial mothers included limited data on how the children were doing one year after the program began, and these data tell a mixed story. (The Appendix summarizes the effects on the children.) The custodial mothers who were associated with the men in PFS, compared with the mothers who were associated with the men in the control group, were less likely to report that their children exhibited emotional or behavioral problems; but they were also less likely to report that their children skipped classes. The program had few effects on other measures of children's behavior or academic performance, as reported by the mothers. Whether the effects on children that did occur were driven by changes in fathers' child support payments or by changes in other types of involvement is unclear.

Lessons About Fathers' Involvement

◇ Increase fathers' access to their children by involving custodial mothers in the program and providing the fathers with legal services to gain visitation rights.

Peer support played an important role in engaging the PFS fathers and increasing their desire and ability to be better parents, but many of the men were often frustrated in these efforts by the custodial mothers. Many fathers reported that they were routinely denied access to their children and that they often faced conflicts about visitation. At the time that PFS was designed, there was little evidence about whether peer support and mediation could increase fathers' contact with their children. The PFS findings, along with findings from other recent research, show that it is difficult to increase fathers' contact with their children, especially if families have lived apart for several years.[24] More-recent programs have shown some promise for families who have low levels of conflict or have recently separated,[25] but these programs also provided legal services to help fathers gain visitation agreements. In contrast, programs like PFS, which rely only on the voluntary cooperation of the custodial mother, may have limited success, because many mothers are reluctant to grant increased access.[26] Many of the PFS fathers did express interest in getting legal assistance to improve their access and gain visitation rights.

Program designers should consider involving mothers in the services, in an effort to increase fathers' access to their children. This objective might be easiest to accomplish if the children are relatively young or if the parents have recently separated. However, the PFS experience showed that, if the program is not mandatory, mothers might need to be offered incentives to participate. Involving mothers might also provide opportunities to reduce conflict, address the mothers' concerns, and make sure that the fathers' efforts to become more involved parents proceed on a positive and productive track. Some sites in the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration do provide services to both parents, based on a team-parenting model.

◆ Monitor the potential for increased parental conflict.

Parental conflict is bad for children.[27] Although PFS increased the frequency of disagreements between parents, this is not necessarily interpreted as a negative outcome, since it most likely reflected the fathers' attempts to become more involved. Nonetheless, program staff should find ways to prevent fathers' increased engagement from leading to serious conflict. Aggressive conflict — which includes yelling, throwing objects, and hitting — did increase somewhat among PFS fathers of very young children and among those with lower education levels. While evidence from other research suggests that most fathers are not a threat to custodial mothers or their children,[28] program designers should be aware of the potential for increased conflict. In developing services for noncustodial parents, sites using funds from the welfare-to-work grant program were required to consult with domestic violence prevention and intervention organizations.

24. Seltzer, 1998.

25. Pearson and Thoennes, 1998.

26. Pearson and Thoennes, 1998.

27. Emery, 1982; Cummings and Cummings, 1988.

28. Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson, 1998.

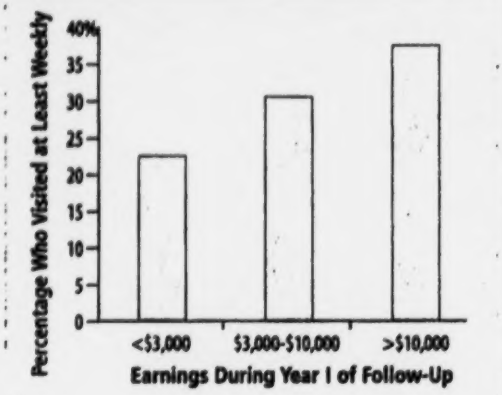
◇ Increasing fathers' earnings may be an important route to increasing their parental involvement.

In the search for ways to help noncustodial fathers become better, more involved parents, the importance of their economic status cannot be overstated. Some of the men in PFS were in severe poverty, which hindered their ability to be stable parents. Research from PFS and other ethnographic work have repeatedly suggested that, in low-income communities, both parents are more comfortable with the noncustodial father's playing a role in his children's life when he has something to "bring to the table." Data from PFS show that fathers who earned more were more involved with their children (see Figure 3). Although it is difficult to determine whether this relationship is causal — fathers who earn more, for example, may have other characteristics that make them more likely to visit their children — society's emphasis on fathers as providers suggests that there is a strong link between how much fathers earn and how often they visit their children.

FIGURE 3

FATHERS' VISITATION, BY EARNINGS LEVEL

Fathers who earned more visited more.



SOURCES: MDRC calculations from the noncustodial and custodial parent surveys.

NOTE: Only fathers in the control group are included.

CHILD SUPPORT

Another goal of PFS was to increase fathers' child support payments by increasing their earnings and changing their attitudes about their responsibilities as parents. In the effort to accomplish this, PFS required child support agencies to change how they did business for low-income fathers, which entailed focusing more on the low-income caseload in general and developing new procedures for the men who were ultimately found eligible for PFS. The experience from the demonstration highlights the potential costs and benefits of such efforts.

Fathers' Characteristics

◇ **The typical low-income noncustodial father is not a "deadbeat": Many of the men in PFS provided some support to their children, but many also owed more than they could pay.**

The child support system does not work well for many low-income noncustodial fathers because it uses practices more appropriate for middle-class men. One result of this, some argue, is that the system has the perverse effect of driving low-income fathers away from their families. Facing child support order amounts that they often cannot pay, they accumulate debt for nonpayment, which motivates many to avoid the system entirely, often thereby limiting contact with their children. As in designing effective employment and training services or increasing fathers' involvement with their children, the key to more effective child support enforcement is a better understanding of the men's circumstances. Many low-income fathers do make contributions of some type to their children, albeit not always through the child support system. Two-thirds of the fathers in PFS provided some type of support to their children — sometimes through the child support system, sometimes outside it, and sometimes through both means (see Table 3, page 24).

In the six months before the survey, 43 percent of the fathers made a formal child support payment, although they did not pay much — an average of $60 per month. A similar percentage made informal contributions of cash or in-kind goods, such as clothing, gifts, and groceries. A major reason why fathers opted out of the formal system in favor of direct payments was that they knew the latter would go directly to their family. Until recently, mothers on welfare received only the first $50 of child support, and the rest went to the state and federal governments to offset welfare costs.[29] This pass-through policy not only discouraged fathers from paying child support but also meant that the payments they did make would not help to improve their relationships with the custodial mother and the children, by showing their commitment to providing support for the family. The pass-through policy also fostered resentment toward the system, which, in the fathers' view, was not concerned with them or their families:

> ***But it's not about the child, not to welfare — it's about the dollar, it's about your salary, it's about you paying the state back their money that they have given your child. It's not about the welfare of the child or the mental status of that child. It's not about that!***

29. The 1996 welfare reform law allows states to discontinue this policy and to pass through all support payments to the family. Most states have continued with the $50 pass-through or have eliminated the pass-through entirely, keeping all support payments for the state.

TABLE 3

FATHERS' CHARACTERISTICS: CHILD SUPPORT

Many fathers provided some support to their children, but many owed more than they could currently pay.

Monthly child support order amount at program entry	$149
Payments during the 6 months prior to survey	
Paid formal or informal support	66%
Paid formal support to child support agency	43%
Average monthly payment among payers	$60
Gave informal support to custodial parent	41%
Child support order as percentage of monthly earnings	
Less than 20%	25%
21% to 50%	16%
More than 50%	59%
Child support arrearages owed at program entry	
Less than $2,000	51%
$2,000 to $8,000	32%
$8,000 or more	17%

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from the noncustodial and custodial parent surveys, child support payment records, and child support case files.

Another way in which the system does not work well for low-income men is that their child support orders are often set at levels they cannot pay. In fact, they are often asked to pay more, as a percentage of income, than middle-class fathers; 60 percent of the PFS men had orders that amounted to more than half their monthly earnings. Such high support orders are often the result of practices like income imputation, which sets orders for unemployed fathers on the basis of *expected* earnings. Another example is that orders for fathers who are incarcerated are typically not modified or suspended; in the minds of many officials, jail time is equivalent to "voluntary" unemployment. The danger is that such policies are counterproductive, leading to huge debts that may discourage any support payments at all and perhaps driving fathers away from their families in an attempt to evade the system. About half the PFS fathers owed more than $2,000 to the child support system, and many reported feeling overwhelmed by the debt.

Findings About Child Support

◇ Bringing in fathers to assess their eligibility for PFS led to an increase in child support payments that outweighed the extra costs of the outreach effort.

In order to bring in fathers and learn who was eligible for PFS, all sites had to conduct extra outreach and review of their existing caseloads, focusing on low-income cases that had often been overlooked in the past. Men who appeared to be eligible for PFS — unemployed and behind on child support payments — were found and called in for hearings to determine their actual eligibility. In three sites, a special study was done to determine the effects of this process, by increasing outreach for a randomly selected group of fathers who appeared to be eligible for PFS. The others who appeared to be eligible faced standard enforcement practices. The men who were subject to extra outreach faced more hearings and enforcement actions, on average, than those who faced standard enforcement. One result of this

process was the discovery that a significant proportion — about one-quarter — of these fathers were working. Facing the prospect of mandatory participation in PFS, they were forced to report their earnings, since they could not participate and work at the same time. Even though these fathers were found ineligible for PFS, many of them subsequently began making regular child support payments (see Figure 4). Comparing the costs of this extra outreach with the total increase in payments that resulted from it shows that the enhanced enforcement effort paid for itself: Costs per father were about $140, compared with an increase in payments of about $240 over two years.[30]

The process of extra outreach revealed other important information about the low-income caseload, many members of which seemed, at least on paper, to be eligible for PFS. One-quarter of the men were working, and one-third of the cases were found to be inappropriate for child support enforcement. Some fathers were disabled and could not work, and others were living with the custodial mother and/or the child. In these cases, staff revised the men's obligations to reflect their circumstances. About 20 percent of the fathers could not be located, and the remaining 20 to 25 percent were deemed eligible for PFS. Thus, the number of fathers who needed services was a small, yet relatively disadvantaged, fraction of the low-income caseload.

◇ In addition to the increased child support achieved by the intake process, subsequent referral to PFS increased payments among eligible fathers. It also led to a reduction in informal support.

The intake process increased child support payments largely by uncovering unreported employment among fathers who were thus ineligible for PFS. Among those who were found eligible, referral to PFS also increased payments: Fathers assigned to the PFS program had higher payment rates than those assigned to the control group, although their average payments were not much higher (see Table 4, page 26). Although it seems counterintuitive that the program could increase the payment rate but not the average amount paid, this may be explained by the fact that fathers' orders were typically lowered while they participated in the program,

FIGURE 4

IMPACTS OF EXTRA OUTREACH ON CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS

Bringing in fathers to assess their eligibility for PFS increased child support payments.

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from child support payment records and PFS Background Information Form.

NOTE: Every quarterly difference shown is statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

30. This increase in payments most likely overestimates the amount of money that went to the child support agency, because it does not subtract the amount passed through to custodial mothers receiving welfare.

TABLE 4

IMPACTS ON CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCMENT ACTIONS AND PAYMENTS

Fathers referred to PFS had more enforcement actions, were more likely to pay child support, and somewhat reduced their informal contributions.

	PFS Group	Control Group	Impact
Child support enforcement actions			
Had a hearing after program entry (%)	70.9	62.2	8.7***
Income withholding order put in place (%)	47	37.1	9.9***
Order modified at program entry (%)	42	4.8	37.2***
Average order after initial modifications ($)	93	149	-56***
Order ever modified after program entry (%)	48.1	18.9	29.2*
Average order amount at 1 year after program entry ($)	143	160	-17*
Formal child support payments			
Average quarterly payment rate (%)	45.4	40.5	4.9**
Average amount paid ($)	274	262	12
Informal support			
Gave informal support (%)	41.4	41.2	0.2
Average value of support ($)	112	149	-37**

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from custodial parent survey, child support payment records, and child support case files..

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between program and control groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Impacts on formal and informal support are not directly comparable. Formal payments are measured using child support enforcement records and cover years 1 and 2 of follow-up, while informal support is measured using the custodial parent survey and covers months 7-12 of follow-up.

with the idea that the orders would be reinstated once the men found jobs. Although the table shows that orders were subsequently modified for almost half the men, orders on average were reinstated to somewhat lower levels (average amounts were somewhat lower for the PFS group at the one-year point). This difference suggests that the men's original orders were set too high and that the subsequent orders better matched their ability to pay.

The fairly small impacts on formal child support shown in Table 4 are driven by large effects in only three of the sites — Dayton, Grand Rapids, and Los Angeles — where quarterly payment rates increased by 10 to 20 percentage points. A comparison of sites' practices suggests that what led to increased payments was a strong peer support component and, probably to a greater extent, the strong involvement of the child support agency in leading PFS. In sites where the child support agency was the lead, staff from that agency were able to monitor cases more closely, tracking fathers' progress through the program and following up with noncompliant cases. In general, these sites were better able to adjust their standard procedures to support PFS.

PFS also led to a small reduction in fathers' informal contributions to their children, showing that some men substituted formal for informal support. Program designers were concerned from the outset that fathers might simply reduce their informal support to meet their new formal obligations, leaving the custodial families no better off. Although some men began paying formal support and did not reduce their informal contributions, this trade-off did occur, perhaps not surprisingly, for men with the lowest earnings.

Lessons About Child Support

◇ When child support agencies have a service option like PFS, reviewing and working low-income cases can be cost-effective.

The low-income segment of the caseload has not typically been pursued by child support agencies because the payoff was thought to be low. But a significant proportion of the men identified as potentially eligible for PFS had unreported earnings — the discovery of which led to an increase in child support payments. This increase was made possible, in part, because of the service option created by PFS. The participation mandate led fathers to reveal their earnings, since they could not work and participate in services at the same time. The service option also made staff less reluctant to pursue low-income cases, because they had something positive to offer men who could not pay support. Courts have found it a substantial benefit to have this service option. In fact, most sites continued running PFS after the demonstration ended, and the home states of several sites — Dayton, Grand Rapids, and Los Angeles — expanded the program to other jurisdictions.

As the child support system continues to put in place new tools to identify fathers' employment and obtain support payments (such as the Directory of New Hires), the amount of unreported earnings discovered by this type of extra outreach might diminish. Nonetheless, bringing in the men might continue to smoke out earnings in the informal economy, which are not likely to be detected through standard enforcement measures.

◇ The involvement of the child support system in a program like PFS is important to increasing child support payments.

If one goal of a program for noncustodial fathers is to increase child support payments, it helps to have the child support office strongly involved as a partner agency. Among the potential partners (including employment and training providers and other community-based organizations), the child support agency has the most direct financial interest in developing effective ways to monitor and enforce participation requirements and to enforce child support.

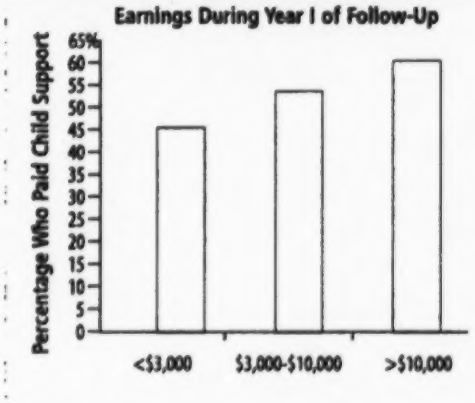
◇ Increasing fathers' earnings is an important route to increasing their child support payments.

Fathers who earn more pay more in child support (see Figure 5). Although it is difficult from the data to prove that one outcome is directly causing another, this relationship has been well documented in other research.[31] These findings suggest again that improving low-income fathers' economic status is an important first step in helping them

FIGURE 5

FATHERS' CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS, BY EARNINGS LEVEL

Fathers who earned more were more likely to pay child support.



SOURCES: MDRC calculations from child support payment records and the noncustodial parent survey.

NOTE: Only fathers in the control group are included.

31. Turner and Sorenson, 1997.

become more supportive parents. Other findings from the evaluation also point to the importance of the fathers' earnings. First, in PFS, nearly all the long-term increase in child support payments came from men who had some earnings. While this pattern may seem obvious, it reinforces the point that generating large increases in child support payments will be impossible without increasing fathers' employment and earnings at the same time. Second, the group of fathers who most reduced their informal contributions when they had to make formal payments was the group with the lowest earnings. As a result, it is very likely that the mothers who most needed support (the custodial mothers associated with these men) were left no better off, or possibly worse off, by stricter enforcement alone. They received less informal support and, because of the pass-through policy, only the first $50 of the fathers' child support payments.

RECRUITMENT AND COLLABORATION

◇ı :s had difficulty enrolling a sufficient number of fathers in the program.

All sites set initial enrollment goals for PFS, and most had difficulty meeting them. The first part of the process was to identify fathers who appeared to be eligible for PFS, locate them, and bring them in for a hearing. Each of these steps was more difficult than expected. Simply identifying men who appeared eligible involved extra outreach, since most of them were not on court dockets, where they could have been interviewed to determine eligibility. Most sites had to go beyond business as usual by conducting special reviews of the existing caseload or reviewing other lists, such as new referrals to welfare and individuals who were about to exhaust their unemployment insurance benefits. Even sites that did identify a sufficient number of fathers found it challenging to bring the men in for a hearing. Caseworkers sometimes had no current address for the father and so could not serve him with notice of the hearing. Sometimes a father was given notice but did not show up (there was usually no serious penalty for not appearing). One site, Dayton, achieved a relatively high appearance rate by breaking with traditional child support enforcement practice and conducting home visits in the week prior to the scheduled hearing.

The final step in the recruitment process was determining how many of the fathers who were brought in were eligible for PFS. As mentioned earlier, this number was much lower than expected — only about 25 percent of the men. A fair number of them were employed, and many were found

inappropriate for further enforcement, because they were disabled, incarcerated, or living with the custodial mother.

The smaller-than-expected enrollments affected the program in several ways. First, they affected the services that PFS provided — especially peer support and job club, which were both designed to be group processes. Effective peer support, in particular, ideally involves the same participants week after week, allowing group members to build trust and solidarity. Second, the low enrollments made it difficult for sites to maintain steady funding streams, since payments for operating costs were tied to enrollments. Finally, the continuous struggle to meet enrollment targets drew management's attention away from other important implementation issues. Consistent with the PFS experience, recruitment challenges are emerging as a key implementation issue for fatherhood programs. Some of the sites in the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration, which is a voluntary program, have also experienced recruitment problems, and so have many of the sites that use Welfare-to-Work grant funds to serve fathers.[32]

◦ Although most sites succeeded in building a working program, getting diverse agencies to work together was difficult and required ongoing attention from management.

Any program that involves multiple agencies faces difficulties in collaboration, and PFS was especially challenging because it brought together agencies that had rarely worked together in the past and that had competing missions. First, PFS asked the agencies to broaden their missions. The child support agency had to expand its mission to include serving the interests of noncustodial fathers, rather than just custodial mothers; and the employment and training providers (especially JTPA agencies) were asked to serve a more-disadvantaged population than they had in the past.

Second, the agencies' missions, although broadened, were still quite different. Child support staff, for example, saw enforcement as their key activity and initially resisted what they viewed as efforts to "coddle" nonpayers. On the other hand, employment and training providers and community-based organizations tended to see themselves as advocates for the men and were sometimes uneasy about referring noncooperating fathers back to the child support agency for enforcement. PFS case managers — who guided the fathers through the program, referred them to services, and monitored their compliance and participation — were most directly affected by the conflicting missions. In order to gain the trust of the men, case managers often presented themselves as an advocate and sharply distinguished themselves from the child support enforcement system. This strategy sometimes made it difficult for PFS staff to develop a strong working relationship with child support staff. Case managers sometimes were intentionally slow to notify child support staff about fathers who were noncompliant or had recently gotten jobs. These tensions among agencies and between the PFS mission and each agency's usual mission made it difficult to present to the participants a coherent, well-integrated program, one in which staff across agencies

32. Martinson et al., 2000; Pearson, Price, Thoennes, and Venohr, 2000.

shared a common vision, communicated a consistent message, and worked effectively together.

Some sites developed specific procedures that helped to coordinate the diverse agencies. Two sites, for example, held regular meetings between PFS and child support staff to review the status of cases. These meetings helped ensure that both types of staff followed through with the actions required on each case and that both had a common understanding of the program's mission.

LOOKING AHEAD

PFS was one of the first programs for fathers, and although it achieved some successes, it generally fell short of its initial goals. Yet the full measure of the program's importance goes beyond its effects on the fathers who participated in it to its effects on the fatherhood field that is burgeoning in its wake. Program evaluation contributes to social policy formation as much by showing what doesn't work as by showing what does work. In the case of PFS, the evaluation suggested several potential improvements on the program model, and it is encouraging that some current fatherhood programs have already gone beyond the model in these or other ways. At the same time, the PFS experience also speaks to issues that are larger than the components of any specific program. Following are some concluding thoughts about the evaluation's implications for the child support system in its treatment of low-income men and for the structure and purpose of fatherhood programs.

The Child Support System

The child support system's original mission was to secure payments from noncustodial fathers in order to recover welfare costs relating to the custodial mothers. This focus on cost recovery had a profound effect on the culture of child support agencies: Essentially, nonpaying fathers were viewed as lawbreakers. Recognizing that this focus has led to policies that may be counterproductive, many have called for a change in the culture of the child support system to one that is less focused on cost recovery and more focused on helping low-income families, which

involves working with other agencies to help low-income fathers.[33]

The PFS experience shows that this shift in focus is possible. Child support staff can effectively handle these new types of cases; they can institute procedures to review fathers' cases and modify their support orders as appropriate; and they can work with other agencies to monitor fathers' progress in employment and training programs. Such changes have been occurring to some extent in child support offices around the country. As in the large demonstration projects, several states have started programs that provide services to fathers through partnerships of child support agencies and community-based organizations. At the core of these changes is recognition that many low-income fathers, although not necessarily paying child support, are involved with their children to some degree, both emotionally and financially. The following two practices, in particular, could foster rather than hinder father-child relationships.

◇ Pass through all of the child support payments to the family.

At the time that PFS started, the "$50 pass-through" policy was still in effect, so that custodial mothers on welfare received only the first $50 per month of the fathers' child support payments and any additional collections were kept by the state and federal governments to offset welfare costs. This pass-through policy is widely thought to discourage payments. Fathers in PFS were well aware of the policy and often responded to it by opting to provide informal payments, which they knew would directly benefit the custodial family. In addition, the recent evaluation of the Wisconsin Works (W-2) Child Support Demonstration tested the effects of passing through all of the support payments to the family and disregarding this amount when calculating custodial mothers' welfare grants. Findings from the W-2 evaluation show that this new policy encouraged more fathers to make support payments.[34]

The 1996 welfare reform law eliminated the pass-through requirement, so that states are now free to pass through the entire amount to the family (although the states must cover these costs). Unfortunately, most states have retained the $50 pass-through or eliminated it entirely, thus keeping all of the child support payments for the state.[35]

◇ Consider policies to prevent the buildup of unreasonable child support arrearages.

Over half the men in PFS owed more than $2,000 in child support when they entered the program. Such debts are unlikely to be paid, considering the extreme poverty in which many low-income fathers live, and they create an incentive to avoid the child support system entirely. Child support practices that more adequately address fathers' circumstances would help to prevent the buildup of this level of debt. Support orders should be set according to what a father can pay, for example, and should be modified during periods when he cannot pay.

33. Primus and Daugirdas, 2000.

34. Meyer and Cancian, 2001.

35. Child support collections that are not passed through to the family are used to offset welfare costs, with a share of the collections going to the state and the rest to the federal government. If a state chooses to pass through the collections to the family, it forgoes its share of collections but must also repay the federal share, meaning that the state covers the entire cost, not just the state's share, of the pass-through.

For fathers who do owe large amounts of child support today, program designers should consider debt forgiveness policies. The Baltimore site in the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration includes a debt-leveraging component, whereby fathers' debts are reduced over time as long as the men are working and/or participating in the program. Since 1986, with the enactment of the Bradley amendment, the courts have not been allowed to modify past-due support. However, the parties owed the debt — the state or the custodial parent — are allowed to forgive or compromise the portion of the debt owed to them.[56]

Fatherhood Programs

The Involvement of the Child Support Agency

PFS required a partnership between child support agencies and other service providers, and many current fatherhood programs have a similar structure. Yet it is not obvious that providing services in a "package" is necessary or even preferable to providing them separately. An alternative model might be a program that focuses solely on employment and training services for fathers; after the men find jobs, the child support system could step in and begin enforcing payments — of course, with support orders set at appropriate levels and modified when necessary.

There are several advantages to involving the child support agency as a program partner. First, the agency can influence recruitment and participation in the program. Although recruitment is never easy, child support staff are an obvious source of referrals — as in PFS and in many of the programs operating with Welfare-to-Work funds. In terms of encouraging fathers to participate, the child support agency can provide both incentives and sanctions. For example, the agency can lower support orders while fathers participate in the program; and staff can refer noncompliant fathers back to court, where they will face standard enforcement and possible incarceration.

Second, if one of the goals of the program is to increase fathers' support payments, the findings from PFS show that it is important to have the child support agency strongly involved, so that staff can track fathers' participation and employment, modify support orders, and enforce payment.

Third, the child support agency's involvement as a partner might facilitate the shift toward a focus that is more responsive to fathers' circumstances. In PFS, child support staff's involvement with service providers helped them to see and appreciate the reality of the men's lives. It is not clear that the system would undertake this shift in philosophy on its own. Such a shift might increase the fathers' willingness to be part of the formal child support system if they see it as "fair." It might also enhance the effectiveness of the employment and training services for fathers. In an earlier program, the Young Unwed Fathers Project, once the fathers found jobs, they were subsequently pursued by the child support system. Being unprepared for this outcome, and without a program set up to ensure that the system would set reasonable support orders, many of the young men felt that they had been misled.

Strong involvement by the child support agency also has several potential drawbacks — one being that it could make fathers reluctant to enroll in the program in the first

56. See Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2000.

place. The men in PFS had adversarial relationships with the child support system; many had even been arrested for failing to pay child support. Similarly, some of the programs currently funded by the Welfare-to-Work grants have also found that some fathers, especially those with large arrearages, are reluctant to become more involved with the child support system. Some men also fear that an invitation to participate in a fatherhood program is a "sting" operation designed to enforce support payments.

A second potential disadvantage of partnering with the child support system, as the PFS experience shows, is that the collaboration of diverse agencies poses major coordination challenges and calls on each agency to make a large shift in its philosophy. Although the child support staff in the PFS sites were able to change their operating procedures to accommodate the program's demands (typically, by reducing their caseloads) it is not clear that all local child support systems would have sufficient time and resources to do this effectively.

Finally, some have argued that PFS, because it tried to accomplish so many different goals, was limited in the extent to which it could achieve any of them. The program's focus on increasing child support payments, for example, may have taken away from its focus on providing effective employment and training services or services to help the men become better fathers.

Serving a Broader Group of Men

Although the fathers in PFS were very disadvantaged, the problems they experienced with poverty and the labor market are common to a significant number of poor men, whether fathers or not. The economic status of less-skilled men has deteriorated substantially since the early 1970s. This decline has not been limited to men who are noncustodial fathers, and it has had effects that go beyond the failure to pay child support. Wilson has argued, for example, that the decline in black men's employment prospects has contributed to the fall in marriage rates within their communities.[37]

PFS served low-income men who were not paying child support, and most of the current programs target similar groups. But should programs necessarily be restricted to fathers who are not paying child support, or should they instead serve all low-income noncustodial fathers? Going a step further, should they serve *all* low-income men, who are generally an underserved group? Most employment and training programs are targeted to current or past welfare recipients, and the programs that do serve men, such as the JTPA program, serve only a small fraction of those eligible. A recent study estimated that only about 6 percent of low-income noncustodial fathers participated in JTPA.[38] In the effort to develop effective services for noncustodial fathers, program designers might consider the benefits and costs of serving a broader population. Doing so might help with recruitment problems and also improve the effectiveness of services that are provided in groups. Some of the sites in the OCSE Responsible Fatherhood Demonstration follow this strategy, casting a wide net in their recruitment efforts and accepting into the program the fathers who did not meet all the eligibility criteria.

In their efforts to better serve low-income men, policymakers might also consider expanding eligibility for the Earned

37. Wilson, 1987.

38. Sorenson, 1997.

Income Tax Credit to include noncustodial fathers who pay child support. The EITC, which provides substantial benefits to low-income working families, is currently available only to families with children. Allowing noncustodial fathers to claim the benefit — possibly sharing it with the mother if she works or increasing the amount given to two parents who work and provide support — would encourage work and child support payments, thus improving the lives of both the fathers and their children.

Marriage

I really want to be, I want to be a family man. That's what I want to be.

There is growing sentiment among some advocates and policymakers that the key to stemming the tide of absent fatherhood lies in policies that encourage marriage. Such policies might include providing messages about the importance and benefits of marriage, in an effort to change social norms; providing classes to teach marriage and parenting skills; and reducing the disincentives for marriage that exist in the tax code and some transfer policies.[39] The implication is that fatherhood programs should include more explicit references to the benefits of marriage. A few of the sites in the Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration have recently taken this route, adding marriage discussions to their peer support component.

The lesson from the PFS evaluation and other research is that efforts to promote marriage within fatherhood programs will be limited in what they achieve unless they also address the men's need for stable and well-paying jobs. Although there is undoubtedly a cultural component to the decline in marriage rates (because this has occurred across all economic groups), an important part of the decline for low-income families is economic. As mentioned, Wilson found that part of the reduction in marriage in low-income communities reflects a fall in the number of gainfully employed, or "marriageable," men.[40] In interviews with low-income single mothers in Philadelphia, Edin found that many women were interested in marriage but at the same time were reluctant to marry men who were economically unstable.[41]

For their part, the fathers in PFS were interested in being partners and fathers, but they were usually hindered from doing so by their own lack of stability and income. As the quotation above illustrates, low-income fathers often have the desire to be "a family man." But many lack the capacity.

Helping low-income men develop the capacity to become responsible fathers should be a goal of social policy, since the potential benefits — including greater stability in the men's own lives, more involvement with their children, and the formation of longer-lasting relationships — go far beyond the men themselves. In the ongoing effort to design strategies that work for low-income men, the PFS experience points to several promising approaches that fatherhood programs might take.

39. Horn and Sawhill, 2001; Horn, 2001.

40. Wilson, 1987.

41. Edin, 2000.

APPENDIX

The Effects of PFS on Children

The survey of custodial mothers included a limited number of questions about their children's well-being. These questions, like the questions about fathers' visitation, refer to the youngest child for whom support was owed. In addition, they were asked only whether the child was between ages 5 and 17. Thus, although the custodial parent survey includes interviews with 2,005 custodial mothers, only 1,173 mothers were asked the questions referring to the well-being of the youngest child. A few of the questions related to the behavior of older children; these were asked only of mothers whose children were ages 11 to 17. The size of this smaller sample is 365.

Appendix Table 1 presents some of the results of the custodial parent survey. The outcomes refer to the period covering the six months prior to the survey, or months 7 to 12 of the follow-up period. The data tell a mixed story. Fewer mothers in the PFS group than the control group responded that their children had seen a doctor for emotional or behavioral problems, and fewer reported that their children were not currently enrolled in school. On the other hand, more mothers in the PFS group reported that their children had been truant in the six months prior to the survey. It is possible that the effects on enrollment and truancy are related, if the children who were encouraged to stay in school are those who would have been truant most often. Finally, PFS had no effects on school performance and discipline (shown in the table) or on other behaviors of adolescents, such as involvement with the police (not shown). The results suggest that the program may have had some effects on children, but the mixed pattern of results, combined with the limited number of outcomes analyzed, suggests caution in drawing con-

APPENDIX TABLE 1

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN

Outcome (%)	PFS Group	Control Group	Impact
For children ages 5 to 17			
Did the child have displinary or behavioral problems at school?	33.5	35.3	-1.8
Did the child see a doctor or therapist for emotional or behavioral problems?	9.1	12.6	-3.4*
How well has the child done in school?			
One of the best	29.3	30.0	-0.7
Near or above the middle	56.1	56.8	-0.6
Below the middle	14.4	13.2	1.2
The child was not enrolled in school.	2.4	4.5	-2.1**
For children ages 11 to 17			
Has the child skipped school or cut classes?	18.9	9.5	9.4**

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the custodial parent survey.

NOTES: A two-tailed t-test was applied to differences between program and control groups. Statistical significance levels are indicated as *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

All outcomes refer to the six months prior to the survey.

clusions. A fuller picture of the program's effects would have required a more extensive set of questions about the children, such as items typically used in child development studies and a longer-term analysis. A wider range of child-related questions was not included in the survey of custodial mothers because the primary focus of the evaluation was on the fathers' behavior.

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San Francisco Works: Toward an Employer-Led Approach to Welfare Reform and Workforce Development. 2000. Steven Bliss.

Canada's Earnings Supplement Project

A test of an innovative financial incentive intended to expedite the reemployment of displaced workers and encourage full-year work by seasonal or part-year workers, thereby also reducing receipt of Unemployment Insurance.

Testing a Re-employment Incentive for Displaced Workers: The Earnings Supplement Project. 1999. Howard Bloom, Saul Schwartz, Susanna Lui-Gurr, Suk-Won Lee.

MDRC Working Papers on Research Methodology

A new series of papers that explore alternative methods of examining the implementation and impacts of programs and policies.

Building a Convincing Test of a Public Housing Employment Program Using Non-Experimental Methods: Planning for the Jobs-Plus Demonstration. 1999. Howard Bloom.

Estimating Program Impacts on Student Achievement Using "Short" Interrupted Time Series. 1999. Howard Bloom.

Using Cluster Random Assignment to Measure Program Impacts: Statistical Implications for the Evaluation of Education Programs. 1999. Howard Bloom, Johannes Bos, Suk-Won Lee.

Measuring the Impacts of Whole School Reforms: Methodological Lessons from an Evaluation of Accelerated Schools. 2001. Howard Bloom.

The Politics of Random Assignment: Implementing Studies and Impacting Policy. 2000. Judith Gueron.

Modeling the Performance of Welfare-to-Work Programs: The Effects of Program Management and Services, Economic Environment, and Client Characteristics. 2001. Howard Bloom, Carolyn Hill, James Riccio.

A Regression-Based Strategy for Defining Subgroups in a Social Experiment. 2001. James Kemple, Jason Snipes.

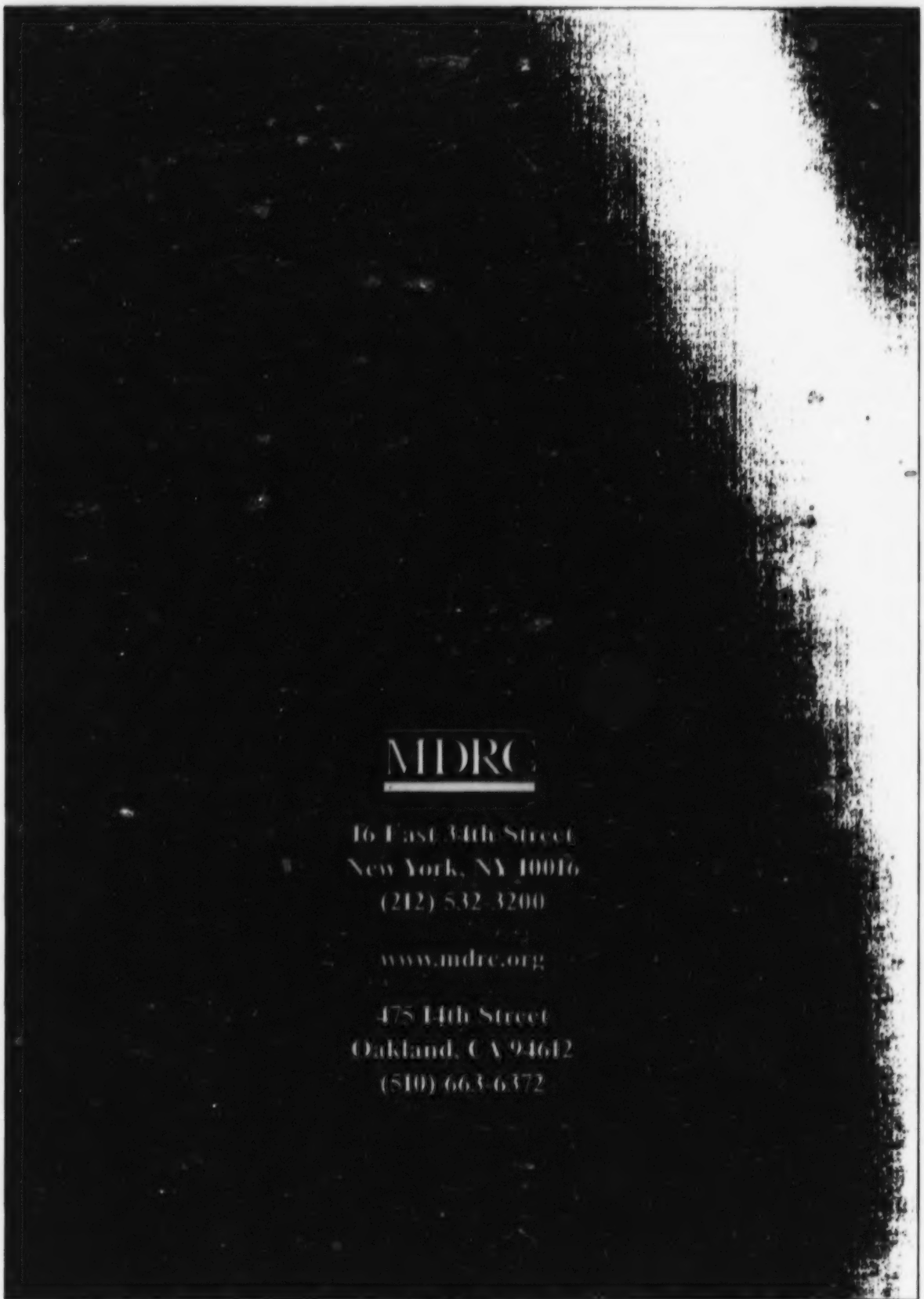
About MDRC

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization. We are dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research and the active communication of our findings, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. MDRC was founded in 1974 and is located in New York City and San Francisco.

MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

Our projects are a mix of demonstrations — field tests of promising program models — and evaluations of government and community initiatives, and we employ a wide range of methods to determine a program's effects, including large-scale studies, surveys, case studies, and ethnographies of individuals and families. We share the findings and lessons from our work — including best practices for program operators — with a broad audience within the policy and practitioner community, as well as the general public and the media.

Over the past quarter century, MDRC has worked in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada. We conduct our projects in partnership with state and local governments, the federal government, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.



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